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UNCLAS MADRID 003074

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SPAIN: ADDRESSING THE THREAT OF AVIAN INFLUENZA

REF: SECSTATE 153802

1. ESTHOFF made reftel points August 23 to Health Ministry Deputy Director General Jose Perez Lazaro, requesting the contact details of the GOS Avian Influenza POC. Perez Lazaro informed ESTHOFF August 30 that the GOS Health Ministry POC (for possible transmission to humans) would be Director General for Public Health Manuel Onorbe de Torre. Phone: (34) (91) 596-2062. Fax: (34) (91) 596-4409. Email: dgsp@msc.es. Perez Lazaro said the Agriculture Ministry would retain the lead for issues related to the transmission of Avian Influenza among animals. The POC for these issues is Deputy Director General for Animal Health Arnaldo Cabello Navarro. Phone: (34) (91) 347-8295.

2. Perez Lazaro underscored that the Health and Agriculture Ministries were cooperating closely on Spain's borders to help prevent Avian Influenza from reaching Spain. Both ministries have ordered intensified checks on the borders and the Agriculture Ministry has distributed "rapid test" kits to border regions. The Health Ministry, for its part, has ordered two million antiviral treatments ("Tamiflu") to combat the possibility of an epidemic among the human population.

3. The Agriculture Ministry has had a "National Vigilance Against Avian Influenza Program" in place since 2003 that has detected no/no cases of Avian Influenza since its inception. The Ministry believes that a spread to Spain remains "improbable." The Spanish authorities reportedly believe that avian migration patterns make northern Europe more vulnerable than the south. Should that calculation change, Spain would not find it too difficult to take measures similar to Holland (keeping poultry indoors), as only four percent of Spanish birds are currently kept outside (compared to over 40 percent in Germany, according to the press).

4. COMMENT: The GOS did not respond to our demarche until after the August 25 emergency EU meeting called to coordinate Europe's response to the threat. Spain's relatively unalarmed response tracks with our understanding of the results of the EU session, which reportedly characterized the immediate risk of Avian Influenza spreading to the EU as "remote" or "low." That said, Spain is not ignoring the threat and, like most of its EU partners, has stepped up both its border vigilance and its efforts to combat any possible human epidemic.  
AGUIRRE